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THE TRADITION OF WAR



By
RANDOLPH S. BOURNE
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THE TRADITION OF WAR

ONE of the most important things that we can learn in regard to this world about us is that ideals and institutions are far less rational than they generally purport to be. And in no field is this more obviously true than in that of war and the preparation for war. There is always a tacit assumption made by militarists that armaments have their origin in an imperative national need, and that the sole reason for their maintenance and increase is the fact that they are the only insurance a nation has against dishonor and ultimate annihilation. The workers for peace are jeered at as sentimentalists who will not see things as they are, and who are trying to substitute impractical feeling and good wishes for the stern exigencies of a practical adaptation to a world of force and fraud. In other words, the constant assumption is made, often by peace-lovers as well as militarists, that militarism is wholly rational, that statesmen and governments have built up their armies and navies in hard-headed practical answers to definite dangers which threaten their country or to the requirements of growing industrial strength or "national dignity." When we consider these needs, however, we shall find certain curious paradoxes that grow out of the rationality of militarism, and we shall be led to believe that there is a large element of the irrational and the naïvely unconscious in the sternest schemes and the boldest poli-

cies of our "hard-headed" generals and militaristic classes. We shall find, in fact, that it is they who are the sentimentalists and that they are adapting themselves to ghosts which have long since ceased to inhabit the corporeal bodies of facts.

THE OSTENSIBLE REASONS FOR MILITARISM

The reasons generally given by the great powers of the world to-day for the maintenance of great armaments are two: to protect the homeland against aggression, and to keep open the trade-routes abroad which are necessary for the sustenance of the nation's life. The strengthening effects of war, its usefulness in keeping the character of the nation "virile," is not heard of so much to-day since the deadly work of novelists and artists has shown us how war actually eliminates all the "fit." But the emphasis to-day is all upon the "defensive" character of armaments and war. No nation dares give to-day as a reason for its vast armaments the desire for aggrandizement at the expense of its neighbors. It would be well if militarists would pause and consider the full significance of this fact. For it amounts to a substitution of a negative character for a positive character of war. Not much more than half a century ago it would have been considered foolishly hypocritical for a great nation to disclaim *in toto* any purpose of aggrandizement. The game of war was all too universally understood as one whose prime purpose was the elevation of a nation's power, and the acquisition of territory or indemnity. France and Prussia, for instance, before the war of 1870, were like hounds held in a leash,

eager to be at each other and prove for all time which was the dominating power on the Continent of Europe. This swing of international opinion from the tacit conviction that armaments were for offence, to the general assumption that armaments are for defence merely, is tell-tale evidence of an enormously significant character that militarism itself has been gradually forced back, since the growth of the Peace Movement, to a defensive position, to a trial for its own life. Militarism itself has awakened to the fact that it needs apologists, and it is setting itself to work thus to make itself respectable.

THE PARADOX OF MILITARISM

But this particular apology leads the militarists into a very curious paradox. For if each nation were sincerely armed only for defence and never for aggression, it is obvious that armaments would be useless, for none would attack—and there can be no defence without an attack. Any danger from small uncivilized countries who have not reached this stage of militarism would be quite negligible and could be easily repulsed. If the Powers are really to stand about, armed but entirely passive, as they purport to be doing, they are in the ridiculous position of never getting a chance to use their arms, for none will attack them. And military equipment and training become, what pacifists have long suspected them to be, the basis for a great toy-game of the mimic war of manœuvres at which every year kings and generals play. But indeed a costly game and one which a rational world, emancipated from the “tradition of war” would soon put an end to!

That then is the paradox of militarism, and it can only be avoided by the remark, which any militarist would make, that this perfect security of defence would only exist if all the nations kept faith, and it is the risk of the bad faith of one of the nations that keeps all the others in arms—though they all purport to be arming only for defence. But it is exactly that growth of international good faith, of an international public opinion, almost of an international honor and etiquette which we have been witnessing in the many triumphs of diplomacy and arbitration during the last forty years. So that this risk of bad faith is one which is constantly lessening; and just as far as the new international honor operates, just so far will sincerity be effective, and just so far will it be possible, progressively, to reduce armaments.

THE IRRATIONAL FACTORS

But the paradox is, of course, that along with this growth of international understanding and honor there has gone not a reduction but a mutual increase in armaments, and we must begin to suspect the accuracy of that perfect adaptation to hard cold facts which the militarists pride themselves upon. For a growing internationalism and interweaving of national economic and spiritual interests is an undoubted fact of the last forty years, and yet militarism has made no adjustment to this palpable world-situation, but indeed has made an adaptation to quite the reverse condition of affairs. Only one conclusion can be drawn, and that is, that there must be a very large and unusually

tenacious factor of irrationalism in the militaristic propaganda, and that it rests not on any real sensitiveness or adaptation to a modern world-situation but upon unconscious forces of tradition, social habit and prejudice. It would be surprising if this were not so, for all institutions have a continuity and run uninterruptedly back to long buried epochs and social conditions. And militarism, being one of the most hoary, as well as the most "respectable" of our institutions, must of necessity have the largest element of the traditional within its forms and ideals. Like all institutions which come down from a venerable past, it continues more and more to live upon that past and clings blindly and stubbornly to life, on the plea that it does represent a real response to present pressing needs, when actually the social needs to which it is a response are already a thing of a past era. And it is the duty of every intelligent person to separate out this irrational traditional factor in every institution—and imperatively in the institution of militarism—from the factor of rational adaptation to a world of the present with its problems of social adjustment and control. For all progress, international as well as national, public as well as individual, consists simply in this, the substitution of conscious rational control of environment for the unconscious yielding to the traditional forces of inertia and habit. The Peace Movement represents exactly this substitution—of rational conscious arbitration for blind instinctive war—in the momentous field of international relations, the most comprehensive sphere of human activity. The Peace Movement therefore represents enlightened

awakened progress, while militarism merely represents the unawakened forces of prejudice and outworn tradition.

THE STUBBORNNESS OF MILITARISM

Having discovered the fact that the militarists, in attempting to justify war on the new defensive basis to which they have been forced have revealed the irrational factors which enter into their philosophy, we must now try to estimate the size of those factors and ask ourselves why militarism, though placed on such an obviously irrational basis, should yet have survived and can appear to-day so menacingly strong.

It is strong, in the first place, because it has the support of a venerable military caste, with a definite body of military science and codes of behavior and etiquette and drill, and a powerful esprit de corps. The history of many religious bodies shows that almost any institution whose organization is based on the principle of sharply graded authority and rigid obedience will have an enormous power of self-preservation, even long after its ideals and dogmas have come to be generally regarded as utterly fantastic. Their long survival was proof of their rigid capacity for organization and in no sense a proof of their inherent worth. So militarism has its schools, its discipline, its quasi-hereditary organization—all that is needed to give it a solidity of front against the most momentous of social changes or public opinion. In addition, it enlists the support of the State and is mixed up in the political life of the nation, and so enjoys a protection which is denied less fortunate institutions like the

Church in America. And the militarists have cleverly used this connection to befuddle the wits of masses of people with shibboleths of "patriotism," identifying the war ideals with love of country, and representing hatred of militarism as in a way synonymous with disloyalty to country; though any intelligent person will recognize in an instant that the power for war is one of the least of the glories of the State, and that one's country is worthy of love and loyalty in and for itself, quite apart from its military or naval power; it is its national character and its prosperity which to-day enlist the true patriotism and not the ability to be a bloody braggart.

ANOTHER REASON

In the second place, militarism, at least in the leading European powers, is linked up with the interests of the most powerful economic and landholding classes of the country. I do not here refer to the scandalous activities of the great steel and armor-plate firms like the Krupps, who are accused of systematically and artificially creating European war-scares, although these revelations are wonderfully significant in showing up the desperate and laborious measures which are necessary to-day even to work up war-feeling in this modern natural situation of world-peace. What I mean here is the fact, often pointed out by European Liberals, that militarism works in the interest of the aristocratic classes, against whom the masses interested in social reform are beginning to make headway, by keeping popular attention centered on the bugaboos of "the foreign devil." Among the most useful and

industrious classes in England to-day, for instance, one of the fears expressed with regard to the return of the Conservative Party to power is that they will be inclined to stir up foreign war. For as long as the nation can be kept seriously alarmed about "foreign invasion" and seriously concerned for "home defense," it will not seem safe to dislocate social conditions at home, and the resources which should go to imperative social reform will seem to be demanded for bigger and bigger armaments. The war-scare then is a spiritual asset of privileged classes who are fighting to preserve that citadel from which they have so often been threatened with dislodgment during the last half-century.

THE FICTITIOUS POETRY OF MILITARISM

And militarism is stubborn, in the third place, because it has got itself haloed with an unreal aureole of romance and poetry. But one has only to know a little of war to feel its dreary horror. Only an incorrigible sentimentalist can make the one moment of flashing charge on the battlefield cover up all the meanesses and anguish of the rest that war involves. Let the enthusiast turn over the pages of the "Photographic History of the Civil War"—one of the greatest books of peace propaganda in existence—and try to extract some glory from this monotonous succession of listless soldiers about a campfire, of wagon-trains crossing a ford, of heaps of gunny-sacks that once were men, piled in ditch or field, of little bands of men running up a primitive village street, of little clustered towns destroyed by shell and fire. For this is what the re-

morseless eye of the camera tells us war really looks like—enormous futile labor, sordid tragedy, listless despair. Or let the enthusiast for war as a science or a game read Tolstoi's "War and Peace," and see depicted there the helplessness of even the greatest generals in the grip of elemental forces and uncontrollable masses of men, and the pure fortuitousness of battle.

THE TRADITION OF WAR

War, entrenched in social caste and class-interest and poetized with fictitious glamor, has been kept alive from eras when its need was genuine, and vital to our present age when it is both an anomaly and a curse.

No one can deny that the Middle Ages in Europe presented a theatre prepared for war, perhaps the most fitting the world has ever seen. With the shattering of the Roman Empire and the invasion of hordes of semi-barbarous people, European society fell apart into chaos, only to be reorganized, as the invaders were gradually assimilated, into small bits of sovereignty, into thousands of small manors and independent principalities. In such a chaos of independent rulers, quarrelsome, bent only on increasing their land and influence, war was the inevitable state. With the gradual extension of the King's authority, and the gradual process of nationalization, these small sovereignties were merged into a larger whole and the area of war immensely restricted. War within nations now ceased to be the normal state, and became possible only between nations themselves. But with the process of nationalization has come a change from a

feudal to an industrial society which is made for peace and depends upon peace, just as the feudal society was made for war and depended upon war. Through these two processes, the meaning and usefulness of war have been gradually restricted. From being a real response to the necessities of the state of civilization it has become more and more a tradition, surviving, as we have seen, through its cunning linking-up with class-interest and sentiment—a parasite, living not because of its own ability and worth, but because it has been able to live upon other movements and interests which were vital and genuine.

WAR UNIMAGINABLE

Indeed to the normal vision of most of us war is almost unimaginable; even in Europe none of the great civilized nations has seen war within its boundaries for more than forty years. And it is significant that the press dispatches of the recent wretched Balkan conflict spoke far more of its physical horrors than of its dramatic glories. The signs seem to indicate that the world is losing both its imagination and its taste for war. Here in America, it is true, our comic-opera Spanish War did excite martial fervor for a time, but it was too fantastic to last. The Dewey furor seems almost grotesque now in the light of the complete oblivion which has descended upon the leaders of that war. In a military age, they would have been called to places of honor and power in the State, but the hollowness of it all was too much for our common sense. It was not our national ingratitude that we displayed in forgetting them, but rather

the most healthy and genuine of instinctive realizations that war was out of date, that our modern civilization with its international interweaving bonds of financial and economic dependence is a civilization organized for peace and for peace alone. Our forgetfulness was the best proof that we realize in our heart of hearts that the change from a feudal society based on isolation and force to an industrial creative society based on co-operation and exchange has definitely and for all time relegated war to the dusty limbo of the past. Even in Europe, with its war-memories and Balkan turmoil, the difficulty of arousing conscription sentiment, the demonstrations held in Germany and France by large sections of the workers—all bear witness to the same thing. The fact can no longer be blinked at; the military game is up.

THE TRADITION MUST GO

Militarism, then, continues to exist only as a tradition, a superstition which has survived after its reason has departed, after the epoch to which it was a normal adaptation has utterly passed away. If there remain reasons why nations should watch one another with jealous eye, the basis for those reasons is being rapidly done away with, through the strengthening machinery of international conciliation. But the fact that war is a superstition does not mean that there is no work left for the Peace Movement to do. For it is characteristic of all institutions and large ideas, that, in proportion as they become traditional and lose their vitality, their supporters become more fanatical in their belief. And it is exactly this outburst of superstition

tious fanaticism, which the present craze for armaments in Europe and America represents. As the ground slips under their feet, militarists outdo themselves in efforts to reinstate their position. If they yield a little in theory, they redouble their activity in practice.

So that this fanaticism can only be overcome by the cool persistent reason of the peace propaganda, by a resolute insistence upon seeing things as they are, unblinded by sentiment or class-prejudice. To understand the true modern world-situation and then adapt international policy to it in such a way as to get completest control of it and completest prosperity for all the nations—this is the task of the statesman. And can we think of those statesmen and leaders of public opinion who still support militarism, who still live in an antiquated world of national “dangers” or “glory,” and prepare for war in a world whose whole functioning is peace, whose whole inner soul cries out for peace,—can we think of them as anything other than deluded victims of the hypnotic power of tradition, posing as clear-sighted men of affairs and responsible arbiters of nations, but actually swayed by ghosts of a historic past when war was the law of the world,—a past projected into a modern world whose prosperity in everything depends on the abolition of strife?

RANDOLPH S. BOURNE.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Nos. 1-66 (April, 1907, to May, 1913). Including papers by Baron d'Estournelles de Constant, George Trumbull Ladd, Elihu Root, Barrett Wendell, Charles E. Jefferson, Seth Low, William James, Andrew Carnegie, Pope Pius X, Heinrich Lammasch, Norman Angell, Charles W. Eliot, Sir Oliver Lodge, Lord Haldane and others. A list of titles and authors will be sent on application.

67. Music as an International Language, by Daniel Gregory Mason, June, 1913.

68. American Love of Peace and European Skepticism, by Paul S. Reinsch, July, 1913.

69. The Relations of Brazil with the United States, by Manoel de Oliveira Lima, August, 1913.

70. Arbitration and International Politics, by Randolph S. Bourne, September, 1913.

71. Japanese Characteristics, by Charles William Eliot, October, 1913.

72. Higher Nationality; A Study in Law and Ethics, by Lord Haldane, November, 1913.

73. The Control of the Fighting Instinct, by George M. Stratton, December, 1913.

A New Year's Letter from Baron d'Estournelles de Constant, December, 1913.

The A B C of the Panama Canal Controversy, Reprinted from The Congressional Record, October 29, 1913. December, 1913.

74. A Few Lessons Taught by the Balkan War, by Alfred H. Fried, January, 1914.

Wanted—A Final Solution of the Japanese Problem, by Hamilton Holt, January, 1914.

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77. Commerce and War, by Alvin Saunders Johnson, April, 1914.

A Panama Primer, Reprinted from *The Independent*, March 30, 1914. April, 1914.

78. A Defense of Cannibalism, by B. Beau. Translated from *La Revue* of February 15, 1909, by Preston William Slosson, May, 1914.

79. The Tradition of War, by Randolph S. Bourne, June, 1914.

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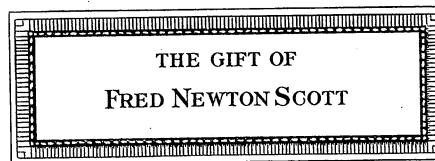
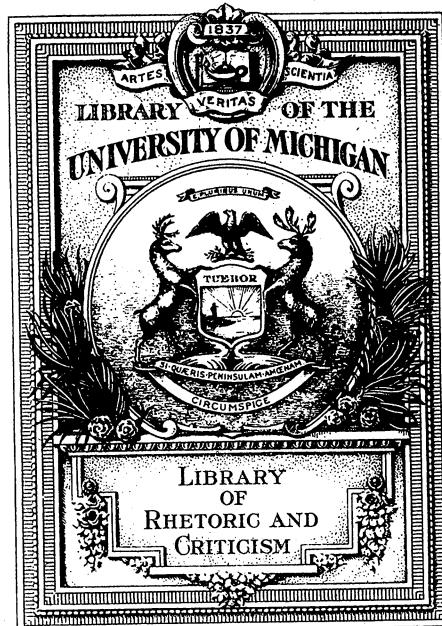
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